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Guinness World Records Day

Page 3



Panda trio passes 100-day checkup

Page 5



Pumpkin pie alternate: Thanksgiving cannoli

Page 11

Hello Kitty's 40 years of cuteness and cool

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — When she came to life in 1974, she did not have a name, sitting sideways in blue overalls and a big red bow, on a coin purse for Japanese girls. On the first Saturday this month, fans around the world celebrated the 40th anniversary of the global icon of “cute-cool.” That is, Hello Kitty.

Only a handful of characters last so long, especially in Japan, where thousands come and go in a highly competitive market. Hello Kitty has the looks, and more.

“Characters must have certain qualities, like an oversized round face, short limbs, and plump body,” said economist Takuro Morinaga, an expert on popular culture. “Kitty follows the basics, yet she has a strong personality.”

Innovative design and clever marketing also helped expand her fan base around the world, said Christine Yano, anthropologist and author of *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek Across the Pacific*.

Hello Kitty's company, Sanrio Co., which specializes in designing and making a wide range of products in the booming “cute” business, created her as a character 40 years ago.

According to Sanrio, her real name is Kitty White, born November 1 — no year is given — in the London suburbs. The birthday date was chosen because it is the birthday of her original designer, Yuko Shimizu.

Sanrio strives to keep Hello Kitty ahead of the curve, factoring in social and fashion trends and collaborating with other popular characters and fashion brands. Her basic appearance hasn't changed much, but just about everything else constantly is. Yano said the philosophy of not resting is part of the character's success.

“That makes things very fresh, very new,” she said in a telephone interview from Boston. “She is always the same but always different.”

The '70s: A Schoolgirl Staple

Made up of just a few simple strokes —

Continued on page 3



FABULOUS AT 40. Hello Kitty greets fans during an event to celebrate her 40th birthday at Sanrio Puroland theme park in Tokyo on November 1, 2014. Fans around the world celebrated the 40th anniversary of the global icon of “cute-cool.” Only a handful of characters last so long, especially in Japan, where thousands come and go in a highly competitive market. Hello Kitty has the looks, and more. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

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